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ABSTRACT

The concept of student support within distance education is particularly diffuse. A learner- or student-centered vision of education considers the needs of individual learners. Another view confines the concept to an add-on, complementary or compensatory approach. One way to consider the question of what student support is necessary is to appraise the totality of efforts to support students in terms of the quality of the resulting education. Asking questions about quality involves the following questions: quality in terms of what? quality for whom? and quality in terms of whose interests are being served? The Project to Investigate Quality and Standards in Distance Education involved eight Australian universities designated Distance Education Centres. It investigated elements of quality, indicators that signified achievement of elements, and processes that foster achievement of quality. Views were sought through policy and "working documents" of institutions, structured interviews with groups providing services to support distance education, interviews with distance education teachers, and through responses of institutional and corporate clients to a listing of factors. Institutions were encouraged to fund student support and provide equitable access to it. Australian distance education was found to be the first area within higher education to be faced with the mismatch of values between publicly funded and user-pays educational systems. Quality and standards had no currency under circumstances in which the user had a choice over what is paid for. (YLB)

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Student support as a Factor Affecting the Quality of Australian Distance Education: the Findings of the Project to Investigate Quality and Standards in Distance Education

Ted Nunan

Introduction

The concept of student support within distance education is particularly diffuse. One view is that it begins with a learner or student centred vision of education and takes seriously the needs of individual learners in shaping administrative arrangements and teaching and learning. Educational processes and outcomes are valued first and foremost for their appropriateness in meeting the needs of individual learners. Further, this view proposes that student support should not be conceived as an add-on to other components of education but instead as a factor which pervades each component and therefore one that is best considered in a holistic way. Because the needs of students are inextricably linked with all components of educational systems, student support is seen as the totality of arrangements which, in their combined effect, meet the needs of individual learners.

There is, of course, a more limited and contrasting view which confines the concept of student support to an add-on to other experiences which may or may not be constructed in ways which value student centred approaches to education. Here, student support can be complementary in that it adds, builds upon, and helps shape the experiences of students in ways which foster learner centred approaches or is compensatory in that it addresses deficits in the learner which are preventing the learner from functioning as an autonomous and independent learner. This latter deficit orientation is often behind the concept of student support within distance education as such support can be viewed as an intervention necessary to ensure that deficit learners can cope with self sufficient teaching and learning packages or that such learners can adjust to the attenuated teaching situation inherent in distance education (ie. reduced face-to-face contact and absence of the supportive atmosphere of tutorial groups).

In practice, student support is often a mix of what is possible in terms of adopting a student centred approach and basic compensatory processes which the student might undertake on a voluntary basis. Any blending is particularly interesting as embedded within it are differences in ideological orientations to teaching and learning. Also, in practice, student support arrangements can often draw attention to disjunctions in the provision of support where the administrative and other procedures of the institution may result in practices which do not necessarily address or meet the needs of external students.

Who Owns Student Support?

Another interesting feature of student support is revealed when one considers who owns the concept: which group/s, as legitimate stakeholders within distance education, employ the concept and through its use give it meaning? Answers to this question, not unexpectedly, vary considerably.

If we accept the position that student support is an all pervasive and central educational component of distance education then the concept would need to be held and understood by all stakeholders. There is an expectation of students that they will be independent, autonomous learners and those who teach would view their role in ways which reinforce this expectation. Further, the institution would design and make available a supportive network of preparatory courses, study skill development opportunities, personal and course counselling, learning support through flexible access to resources including individualised support from the teacher/facilitator, etc. all constructed in ways which avoid deficit views of learners and which students can draw upon to meet their needs. The comprehensive nature of student support is reflected in the description of a learner support system provided by Garrison & Baynton, (1987, reported in Deillon C, Gunawardena, C and Parker, 1992) which sees student support as comprising

> both resources the learner can access in order to carry out the learning process and resources which relate to the mediation of the communication process. The resources of the learning process apply to both distance and on-campus students and include the availability of access to courses, teachers or facilitators, learning materials, library facilities, media equipment and community experts. Among these resources 'the role of the teacher/facilitator is of primary importance in the issue of support'. The need for resources associated with the mediation process results from the geographic distance between the teacher and the learner, and requires some type of mechanical or electronic transfer of information through telecommunications or mail to carry out the two-way communication in the learning process'.

The central challenge of this view of student support is to ensure that all participants in teaching and learning, and all those who provide services to support teaching and learning, operate from a consistent stance which integrates these services by placing the student at the centre of their educational endeavours.

On the other hand, the limited view of student support marginalises and disaggregates support efforts. Different support agencies have limited and specialist roles which relieve teachers of responsibilities of dealing with 'deficit students' or having to meet the challenges

of engaging with individual students to provide resources or communications relevant to individual needs. Support, in such circumstances, is often 'applied' in a reactive fashion.

Whatever the blend of complementary and compensatory, and whatever the extent to which student support is seen as a pervasive aspect of teaching and learning it is clear that there will be a range of different stakeholders : academic teachers, administrative staff supporting distance learning such as those employed in distance education centres to implement aspects of institutional support, librarians, officers of student unions, counsellors, study skill tutors, regional liaison officers, providers of residential schools, communications technology support staff amongst others are all involved in one way or another in attempts to provide a quality educational experience for students.

What Student Support is Necessary?

Not surprisingly, there is a range of answers to this question. Answers can reflect stakeholder views about their perceived role in the processes of distance education. One way of considering the question is to acknowledge that the totality of efforts to support students can be appraised in terms of the quality of the resulting education at a distance.

Asking questions about quality involves at least three connected questions: quality in terms of what, quality for whom, and quality in terms of whose interests are being served?. The stance that student support should be an all pervasive feature of education at a distance would see a clear answer to the second question guiding the responses to the other questions. Quality for whom means quality for students as clients of the system and if this is accepted then it is not unreasonable to allow clients to define what constitutes quality. Further, quality in terms of whose interests can also be answered in terms of the interests of students through meeting their expressed needs. However, few would agree with this analysis, as other legitimate stakeholders in education such as employers, professional associations, and government would contest the one-sided nature of this view. Also, it is often the case that the academic teacher as the person with primary importance in the issue of support does not favour the stance that the quality of the education that they are involved in providing should be evaluated in ways which give over-riding importance to the needs of learners. Thus, the answer to what student support is necessary is complex because

- there will always be qualifiers, both philosophical and economic, upon the provision of student support which reflect different stakeholder views about questions of quality, and,

- even where there is acceptance of the need for support there will be alternative views about the effectiveness of elements of the support depending upon different stakeholders. For example, some academics are opposed to the expenditure of institutional monies on study skills tutors yet strongly support the provision of library support as a necessary pre-requisite to enable students to meet adequately the demands of their course.

Investigating the Quality of Distance Education

The next section of this paper reports some of the findings and recommendations of the Project to Investigate Quality and Standards in Distance Education.(Nunan and Calvert,1992) In the section which follows we will move to consider the importance of student support in appraising the quality of distance education.

The project was commissioned by the Commonwealth Government and was developed under the auspices of the National Distance Education Conference. It involved eight Australian universities designated Distance Education Centres and the investigations were carried out during 1991. Its conception predated the release of significant Commonwealth publications, notably *Performance indicators in higher education* (Linke, 1991) and *Higher Education: quality and diversity in the 1990's* (Baldwin,1991). During the life of the project other policy investigations in the area of higher education were published including a discussion paper on the quality of higher education from the Higher Education Council.

The project was charged to 'develop an inventory of standards that enables distance education provider institutions to define acceptable quality of service and to assess strengths and weaknesses in the provision of services as an aid to long term planning for quality improvement'. The anticipated outcome of the project was ' to inform specialist providers of distance courses of the standards and services that are the goals in the national provision of distance education and to assist the overall evaluation of distance education in Australia'.

In addressing its terms of reference, the project sought to identify three things: the *elements* of quality (*what is valued* in distance education); *indicators* that would signify that these aspects of quality have been achieved; and the *processes* that foster the achievement of quality or its improvement. Recognising different perspectives and levels of analysis arising from different constituencies, the investigation encompassed government policy statements; institutional mission statements, policies and services; the views of academic staff and those providing distance education services in institutions; and the expectations of institutional clients of Distance Education Centres, both within and outside the higher education system. Students and employers as stakeholders were outside the terms of reference.

The decision to work through stakeholders was based on the acceptance of the central role of values in any appraisal of the quality of education. and the desirability of involving stakeholders in framing relevant indicators of quality. The approach adopted by the project in addressing its terms of reference was process oriented, concerned as much with performance improvement as performance evaluation, and involved the active participation of those who might be evaluated in terms of the findings of the project. Such a participatory approach was seen as important to meeting the needs of institutions if they chose to apply the recommendations of the investigation in self monitoring, evaluating and reporting their performance. The investigators recognised that there were problems associated with this approach in combining 'bottom-up' stakeholder views with 'top-down' management directives about quality. However, in avoiding resistance from those whose 'view of reality' might be depreciated by judgements made by others about appropriate indicators and their use, it was hoped that indicators developed through the investigation could be used in a developmental way so that integration of top-down and bottom-up priorities within the context set by institutional priorities would be possible.

One obvious practical problem was to provide a working statement which would effectively define distance education. The project chose not to focus upon characteristics of teaching or learning as we took the position that there were no special characteristics of distance education which logically lead to conceptions of teaching and learning which would differ from the way that those terms are used in relation to education generally. Instead, we chose a practical descriptor of the enterprise of distance education - namely - the case where all units of study for which the student is enrolled involve special arrangements whereby lesson materials, assignments, etc., are delivered to the student, and any associated attendance is of an incidental, irregular, special or voluntary nature. This situation could be served by different administrative arrangements, pedagogies, and support mechanisms. The project was concerned to look towards characteristics of institutional arrangements and the teaching and learning environment which attended to the needs of students who, for whatever reason, did not attend the institution at which they were studying.

Views about the quality of distance education, the factors which impact upon quality, and ways to improve the quality of distance education were sought through policy and 'working documents' of institutions, structured interviews with groups providing services to support distance teaching and learning, interviews with academic teachers teaching at a distance in particular discipline areas, and from institutional and corporate clients through their responses to a listing of factors which a client generated as impacting upon quality.

The Project generated recommendations for fostering and improving the quality of distance education in the following areas: access and equity; policy development, organisation and resource management, processes of distance education and the monitoring and evaluation of distance education. It also developed a set of indicators in the above areas which institutions might use in monitoring and evaluating their own performance in distance education against their particular missions and objectives.

The Perceived Role of Student Support as a Quality Factor

One way of introducing the perceived importance of student support is through the mechanism of the recommendations of the project in this area. The project recommended:

> That institutions establish specific guidelines for disbursement of funds relating to distance education activities, taking account of requirement for development (including research and course development) and delivery (including, besides academic costs, technology, **academic and administrative support of students** and residential schools).
>
> That institutions ensure that students studying in all modes have **equitable access to appropriate academic and administrative support** (e.g. library, study skills, counselling and computing services).
>
> That institutions review any policy statements on **student rights** and responsibilities to ensure their appropriateness to external students.
>
> That procedures for planning and developing distance education, and monitoring and reviewing performance in distance education, in the area of course materials and their implementation address:
>
> - format and presentational quality of learning materials;
> - instructional quality including use of appropriate teaching and interactive processes;
> - workload and assessment load;
> - **arrangements for student support.**
>
> That institutions with a substantial involvement in distance education include in their annual reports major achievements or developments in the areas of:
>
> - external course development and production;
> - technologies used in distance teaching and learning;
> - **student support techniques;**
> - research and evaluation of distance education.

In framing recommendations the investigators were concerned to represent stakeholder views. For example, those engaged in providing institutional support for external students felt that quality improvement was possible where institutions addressed delivery issues through policy and financial planning. This focus reflected uncertainties about the financing of the level of support to educational processes where devolution of financial responsibilities could mean that priorities for such support might vary across the various 'financial units' of the institution. Because of the need to see student support measures as forming a system it was argued that institutions ought establish policies that would apply to all students. Another example is the response of academics when they addressed factors which would improve distance teaching and learning. Two areas of importance that they commonly identified were the institutional provision of tailored support for distance students in the area of communications and library service. The connections with teaching and learning at a distance were stressed: quality of teaching depended upon the quantity and types of interactions possible between teacher and individual student or teacher and students while quality of learning depended upon access and availability of library services. The major question posed was the means by which the institution would provide predictable funding to enable academics to anticipate the extent to which their planning for distance teaching and learning could engage particular levels of service for their students. To cite an oft quoted but simple example, there was a concern about employing teleconferencing or individual phone contact within delivery of a course due to uncertainty about the expectations regarding the use of such technologies and who would meet their costs. Similar concerns were expressed in relation to access to telecommunications and computing facilities, support for teachers and students in their use, and the accounting procedures that would apply to their use within teaching and learning. Thus academics reported concerns for two broad approaches to distance education: extending teaching through technology and extending learning by approaches which would create a richer home learning environment.

Can We Define Standards of Student Support for Distance Teaching and Learning?

By now it should be painfully clear that the question of standards of student support is particularly complex. The dilemma faced by educationists is that educational bureaucrats with economic rationalist leanings know that

- increasing the funding to a particular course does not necessarily improve the quality of the course - more expensive courses, whatever the measure of 'expense', do not automatically produce more and better graduates,
- whatever attempts are made to define standards and monitor achievements in relation to quality or efficiency 'measures' they will be contested by stakeholders, and

- efficiencies are likely to be introduced in the situation where institutions are required to do 'more with less'.

Issues such as these are not easily resolved in systems which have to respond to the pressures of constituencies, and accountability within the public arena allows a continual interplay of checks and balances between constituencies. Decision making is more difficult and takes longer than in other less complex systems.

Defining standards of support can be achieved through an interpretation of the mission statement of an institution in relation to its financial and academic policy framework. This solution accepts the desirability of open democratic processes which inevitably will lead to a plurality in determining what are deemed acceptable standards. However, other solutions are possible.

User Pays Education and Student Support

Where a client has the power to declare particular 'educational specifications' appropriate to the situation of their learners and their corporate needs the situation of designing and providing education is simplified. Negotiation of standards may occur through a 'quality manual' which addresses, amongst other things, the expectations of complementary and compensatory service mechanisms to support course materials and the assessment of assignments/examinations.

The concept of user pays education works where what is used is readily identified - that is, the concept encourages compartmentalisation so that the user has choice over what is paid for. Student support can therefore be an add on to a basic 'minimum experience' with extras such as 'extended library support', individual study skills/counselling, telephone/computer conferencing etc as supplementary elements of a course.

Consequently, a user-pays system characteristics would :

- establish a corporate body with the power to declare 'quality standards' which relate to economic management of the body
- generate choice and options which can be purchased according to the ways that each individual interprets their needs. This can be achieved through provision of student support services which customise the basic experience
- focus educational responsibilities of providers upon 'gate-keeping'. Recognition of excellence rather than a concern for generating the conditions for students to achieve within the course will ensure that individual students accept more responsibility for their performance.

Australian distance education is the first area within higher education to be faced with the mis-match of values between publicly funded and user-pays educational systems. The issue of student support is brought into focus through current changes in the system. On the one hand there is the inevitability of meeting unmet demand through user-pays systems as it is thought that it is politically unacceptable that tax-payers fund unmet and further demand - on the other, there is a strong social desire to see issues of equity being addressed so that we avoid different 'status' and 'class' of educational experience for students. However, competition in the area of user-pays education will inevitably compartmentalise the way education is planned and delivered as there will be a demand by users to 'receive more with less expenditure'.

Under such conditions student support will be :

- defined through services delivered by self funding agencies. In order to self fund it will be necessary to centralise such services with a number of institutions drawing upon the provider,

- disconnected from any consideration of student rights or equitable access to support,

- largely disconnected from considerations of teaching. It will become a teaching and learning issue only when attrition rates are such that consumers feel that their chance of successful completion of their course of study is too low to warrant the expense of enrolment. An interesting parasitic relationship between some 'difficult' courses and student support will be established - difficult courses may be seen as high status courses because of their social sorting role and consumers may see the price of success being the purchase of all important student support, some of which may take the form of supplementary guided tuition.

Under these circumstances the recommendations of the project to investigate quality and standards in distance education have no currency.

Concluding Statement

The diffuse nature of the concept of student support within distance education means that its purposes and provision can be readily contested by stakeholders involved in distance education. Economic agendas have currency in shaping popular debate about education and

are beginning to determine what constitutes support and how it may be provided. The impact of this attention to student support is first being realised within distance education as student support arrangements are often more evident and central to the enterprise. The level and type of provision of support in the area of distance education will progressively respond to economic imperatives placed upon providers by governments and institutions and it is the responsibility of those professionally engaged in distance education to articulate their educational position about student support in terms of the dominant economic discourse. This, of course, provides difficulties in that it will eventually confront economic values - however to choose not to engage with this framework is to opt out of the political and policy arena and relinquish any opportunity to shape the future.

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